

THE FOUNTAIN STREET PULPIT

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CAN WE THANK GOD FOR THIS WAR?

A SERMON

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By

THE REV. DUNCAN E. LITTLEFAIR, B.D., PH.D.

Once again we approach Thanksgiving Day while we are engaged in a devastating and tragic war. Our problem as Christians is to know how and for what we are to be thankful. It is difficult to give thanks in the middle of a war without being extremely selfish, narrow, and unchristian. A Christian should never be thankful for what he has because others do not have as much and certainly not thankful for what he has at the expense of others. So today we are going to discuss the problem of thankfulness in direct relation to the war. We shall ask the most difficult of questions: Can We Thank God For The War?

I should like to proceed by listing what seem to me to be six of the major evils of the war. More there certainly are, but these six will serve our purpose.

First of all there is the most obvious evil of the loss of millions of the young people of our world. Our losses so far are relatively little and certainly insignificant when set against the loss suffered by the Germans, Russians, Chinese, Japanese, and British. But when we think of the capacity and quality of these fine young people who have been sacrificed it is staggering. But few of us stop to think of them in this way. We bury the individual in statistics. Add up these millions of individuals who will die as a direct result of this war and then add to this list the millions upon millions more who have died and will die of disease, malnutrition, lack of medical care, and famine and you will have more than the human spirit can carry. The people who are to make the future are being destroyed. The culture of man has never existed which could stand this loss and not suffer severely. Our very life-blood is being drained off. After such consideration it is anti-climactic to mention the fact that billions upon billions of dollars worth of material value is being destroyed. While these values are only material they are nevertheless component parts of our civilization and contributory parts of our culture. They or their substitutes must be rebuilt or replaced. I only know that the aggregate of this loss is too great for my comprehension. Neither should we forget that alongside this must be placed the fantastic rate at which we are consuming our natural resources in the conduct of this war. What would naturally supply our

people for a year is used up in the course of a few weeks. Obviously we must suffer from these excesses. And surely this almost unbelievable destruction of life and property is alone enough to make war a terrible tragedy in the life of man.

A second great evil of the war is that human life loses its sacredness and meaning. This is a natural result of so much killing. It is the way the human spirit tries to defend itself against the overwhelming tragedy of so many unnatural deaths. When man gets involved in something that is below his moral standard and yet unavoidable he usually lowers his standard in order to absorb the evil. He must either do this, crack under the strain, or find new sources of strength and inspiration in the very midst of the overwhelming evil. Man has been meeting this evil by allowing human life to lose its sacredness. In this particular discussion we are endeavoring to find new strength through new understanding.

We must not forget that man is still but an infant in this world. We go back about a million years to find our origins. There are a great many millions of years of life before that origin and there is perhaps a hundred million years in front of us unless we destroy ourselves prematurely. With this knowledge it is no great task to see that the crust of our civilization is very thin. We are not far removed from the jungle! Behind each of us with our wonderful possibilities of spiritual development there looms the animal. The obvious lesson is that we cannot afford to lower the standards. The moral codes, dignities, and decorums that we have built up are a protection against our lower selves. When we drop these bars we face disaster. The greatest of these bars is perhaps the dignity and sacredness of human life. When misery, suffering and death become too familiar human life loses its sacredness. In this connection there can be no question of the evil that war works.

The third evil to be mentioned in this series is the impulse to lawlessness that war engenders. From early infancy we are taught that it is wrong to steal and wrong to kill. These are engrained moral attitudes and habits. It is foolish to expect then that we could reverse these habits, particularly that of killing, without reaping results that are undesirable.

We cannot put guns into the hands of millions of young people and teach them to use them effectively and mercilessly without expecting that a great many will go on using them and their new habits to get what they want when the war is over. Every war has been followed by outbreaks of lawlessness. We remember only too vividly the years following the last war. There is no reason to think it will be any different after this war.

The fourth evil is the hatred that is set loose in the world. We are taught to pray that God will forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others who trespass against us. We are taught that God is love and if we walk in fellowship with our fellow men we walk in the light and with God. We know that hatred is the opposite of love. And yet we find that we are in a war in which victory goes to the side which can kill most effectively. It seems to be an axiom of military leadership that men who hate the most fight the best. There must be no scruple about this and no hanging back. It is almost too much to ask of the individual that he love the enemy as he kills him. It is extremely doubtful if such a person would be a good fighter. And so hatred is taught and whether or not it is taught it grows. The whole world is divided into peoples hating each other. And sometimes we are not sure whether we love or hate our allies. Out over all the earth and into the hearts of men go these waves of hatred and bitterness. We are taught that no love is ever wasted. I am sure it is not. But it must be equally true that hatred never dies sterile. Someone or some people are always affected. Surely nothing but horrible evil can come from all the hatred abroad in the world today as a result of this war.

A fifth evil is the mental and moral fatigue that seems to set in after a war. It is perfectly natural that it should. We are all acquainted with the need to rest after strenuous effort, or the need of relaxation after a period of tension. It is to be expected therefore that after three or four years of constant effort under rigid routine and order that the men in the services should feel the need of a long period of relaxation. After so much emphasis on the heroic men would feel the need of the bare commonplace. After so much emphasis on service and altruism men would feel the need of looking more particu-

larly after their own personal interests. After so much labor there is the need of apathy Lloyd George has called this whole reaction the "fever of anemia". Whatever we may call it it is there as a significant fact. It is not unimportant that the labor, effort, devotion, and sacrifice which has called forth this anemia has been spent in an entirely negative fashion to destroy what appeared to be a threat to our values. In the very act of destroying the threat many of the values we would cherish are lost. Then at the time when we need the devotion and consecrated intelligence of our people not only to remedy the ravages of war but to prepare the future for which the war was made we find ourselves sapped of our strength and initiative. This is no slight evil.

The final ill effect that we shall mention is that of a growing dependence upon strength of arms that war engenders. The ideal of persuasiveness is, even under the best circumstances, difficult to maintain. But during and after a war it is well-nigh impossible. Wars are won on strength of arms. Ideals and convictions are necessary, but without superior arms to support them they will certainly not win the military victory. Victories in war are won by strength with the natural result that strength comes to be our ideal. Instead of considering the might of right we come to think that might is right. We know the great pride the British have maintained in their navy and naval history. We know the growing pride we have in our navy and army. On the basis of conquest and victories this is a just pride but it is nevertheless a dangerous pride. Pride always lures men, consciously or unconsciously, to set up as an object of worship the object of their pride. God is forsaken for an idol. We become oriented around false means and too often these lead to evil ends. A world prominent statesman early in the war wrote the following striking statement: "The whole structure of Christian Civilization is threatened by waves of moral leprosy, far more destructive than the waves of bombers attacking London. You can see the horrible leer of sick men admiring the physical power which can kill off the sane and sound. The moral menace of this danger is even stronger than the political or physical".

On the other hand there are some possibilities of good in this war. Note carefully these are only

possibilities of good. The evils we have been discussing are positive and destructive. The good we shall discuss is good only if it is made so by the intelligent understanding and devoted service of men. This good is here only on prospect. It must be worked out. That is characteristic of war. It is in itself perhaps the most calamitous of evils, but like everything else it carries within it possibilities of great good. Because the war is an overwhelming convulsive evil the possibilities for good are also much greater than usual.

The first possibility of good is the warmth that comes from the united action which war demands. We know that God is love and love is creative interaction and unity of purpose and interest. When men participate in a common enterprise so that while they bring their various interests and talents and personalities they are united and sustained and encouraged by their common devotion they are experiencing the goodness of God. So barren and impersonal has our modern life become that opportunities to experience this supreme value are more and more limited. It should be at the same time the most common and most treasured of our experiences. It is the way in which men meet God. All of us have known men and women whose lives were arid and unsatisfactory who have found themselves with a new glow and a new sense of meaning through participation in groups working for the war effort. It was apparent that Pearl Harbor did the same thing for our nation that we are now discussing on the personal level. The warmth of participation in a common action is of no little cultural and religious importance.

A second virtue is that this war is raising up in front of men the importance of high idealism and presenting them with the opportunity to engage in such effort. It is ironical that war which is such a tragedy should be the most general form of idealistic effort that man has so far discovered. Perhaps it is open to dispute that war is idealistic or that the men who are fighting it regard it in such light. Undoubtedly there are many for whom it offers no light of idealism. However, we must be careful not to allow our American humor, cynical front, and casualness to betray our real reactions and interests. True, our army is a drafted army, but I think

that in spite of our failure as a nation to conduct this war on the basis of high principle the men who are in the army and navy are fighting on the basis of a just principle to be upheld. I do not think that a modern army could be maintained on any other basis.

It is valuable to realize that idealistic wars are of a comparatively recent origin. And it is significant that the extremely heavy losses in war date from the same period. Historical investigations of early wars offer proof that the men who were impressed into those wars did almost everything but fight. The losses were exceptionally low. Only men with an ideal in their heart will perish in the number required by modern war. Whether this war be acknowledged as a great evil or not it must still be admitted that vast numbers of men and women have found it the highest expression of idealism they have been permitted to know.

A third virtue and possibility of good is that the war is bringing home to the minds and hearts of men the fact that we live in a very small world, that it is in actual fact—one world. We were drawn into this war finally and conclusively by an event thousands of miles from our shores. We find that we are working in harmony with nations previously far out of our range of contact. That which happens ten thousand miles from our capital is of vital significance to us. Never again should it be possible for men to talk intelligently of isolation. There can be no more isolation in our world of nations than is possible for an individual as part of a family living in one house. This fact or rather the recognition of the fact, for it has been true for some time now, is of great possible value for the human family. Until we recognize that we belong together, that we are dependent upon one another, that no nation can live unto itself and for itself we shall go on fighting each other as a blind animal reaction against the ties that bind us. Until we recognize these ties we shall be able to do nothing creative and constructive to make this living relationship a thing of unsurpassed beauty and goodness.

A fourth value from this war is the forced intimate association with our enemies. At first sight it is strange and contradictory to think of war as a means of bringing alien people into close contact.

War is friction, enmity, hostility, and conflict. As such it appears to be the direct antithesis of love or communion. And yet two nations cannot fight without the members of each coming to see the other in a light that would have been impossible in peace time. The average man of one nation is forced into contact with the average man of another nation. Even in deadly combat there is intimacy of association. Beneath the necessary propaganda of war it is possible to see that great numbers of our men are coming to have a new understanding and appreciation of the enemy. In this war as in the last the common soldier resents the imputation of cowardice, treachery and bestiality to the enemy. He has too often seen him loyal, courageous, and gallant. He knows from experience that he is fighting a strong and worthy opponent. The fraternization during war is not unimportant. The world will never forget that the soldiers of Germany and our own met during the first war to sing Christmas carols together in No-Mans-Land and exchange gifts. Great numbers of Americans and Britishers came to have a love and affection both for the German people and the German countryside.

And of course if this is even slightly true of our contact with our enemies, it is much more true of our enforced associations with our allies. Consider the almost infinite value of our alliance with the Russians! Within the space of two years our appreciation of their help in this war, our admiration for their courage, tenacity, devotion and endurance has completely transformed our attitude toward them. Two short years ago "Bolshevist" was the synonym for all that was hateful and despised. Now we stand in admiration convinced he is a man worth watching, with something valuable to contribute to the world family. Compare the present pæns of praise with the scathing burning hatred of yesterday. If this war succeeds in bringing the Russians, British and Americans into intimate association with the inherent possibility of a growing mutual appreciation and affection we shall have made great headway in the building of a new world. This alone could make the war worthwhile! There can be no question but that the hostility which existed between Russia and the other nations was a direct threat to the rest of the world and at the same time a promise that some

day another war would be fought. No two nations can hate each other in our small world as the Russians and we hated without coming to war. Our contacts were too many. If these contacts be not those of love and peace they will be those of hatred and war. It so happens that other hatreds flared first and the war came with Germany. Force of circumstances threw us into the same camp with the Russians. Out of this accident has come a great new hope for the world. The war succeeded in doing in a few short months what would have taken long years of normal peace time routine. Even though it has taken a terrible war to do it we should be thankful for this wonderful possibility of good. Let us neither overlook it nor abuse it. This friendship is not there for personal profit and gain. It has been given to us as an opportunity of world service.

A fifth value of doubtful virtue is the religious revival which seems to accompany war or crisis. I say doubtful because there is little virtue in a wholesale turning to God and religion in the hope that it will "pay" in the way of protection from suffering and death. However, it is perfectly true that war is a crisis that normal life seldom offers. It brings men of sound body and mind face to face with the problem of death. It compels them to reexamine the basis of their existence and the values which they have treasured or neglected. Men cannot daily face eternity without serious appraisal of that for which they have been living. To this extent war does contribute to the good of life. But here again it is only a possibility of good. If the cessation of hostilities and the removal of the threat of immediate extinction dissolves this serious thought nothing has been gained. The good is never finally won. It is always in the process of being gained or lost.

The final possibility of good which we shall discuss is by all odds the most important and probably at the same time the most obscure. War is a judgment of God upon man. It is a judgment upon the kind of life he has been living, the ideals he has been holding, the ends he has been seeking, and the methods he has been using. This does not mean that God has sent the war to us, that he has caused it, or is responsible for it. Lest it be misunderstood I repeat again: This does not mean that God has sent the war or caused it come about. He has not

sent this war as a punishment for our sins. "We have brought it upon ourselves because of our sins." The concept of a divine being who gives and takes away gifts should be foreign to us. It is much more absurd to think of a good God punishing man at all, much less by such a ghastly indiscriminating evil as war. "Can We Thank God For This War?" Of course we cannot! But if we find this war to be a judgment upon us and our sins we may yet find something in this war to be thankful for.

Without going into the question from the theological side it is perfectly obvious that this is man's war. It has been brought upon us by our own activities and our own failures. There is a spiritual law in this world which constitutes the principles of good living, nay more basic than that, the principle of human life. When we violate this principle and this law we suffer the consequences of our sinful action. This war has been brought upon us by our selfishness, our blindness, our ignorance, our concern for material empire, our apparent lack of interest in the true and the good, our faith in strength rather than in right, our almost complete lack of knowledge of the way of God with man and the ways in which man must live with his fellow men in order to be in harmony with his God.

It will do us no good to say that the war was not of our choosing and therefore not our responsibility. It will do no good to say that the other side is worse than we are. The spiritual life doesn't operate after this fashion. And wars, whatever their economic basis, are the result of a failure in the spiritual realm. This war must humble us. It must convict us of our shortcomings. If we use this catastrophe as an excuse for building up pride in our own goodness at the expense of others we are damaging not only ourselves but the world in which we must act. If evil comes into our lives there is some cause for it and some way of eliminating it, overcoming it, or turning it to good use. No evil is ever turned to good when men find in it reason to condemn others. The evil must always be a condemnation of ourselves. God knows we don't have to search very far to find many of these causes within ourselves as individuals, a people, and a nation. Just as most individuals need some sort of crisis to compel them to examine the principles upon which they

are building their lives so men and nations seems to need the tragedy of war. The tragedy lies not only in the fact that we should require such a terrible means to bring us to see the good, but that having brought on such a calamity we would use it to build up our egotism and our pride.

There is a great lesson here for us in our religious history. We know that the Hebrew people in the time of their nation suffered time after time from the ravages of war. Not only were they invaded and persecuted by nations far stronger and larger than they, but at times almost the entire population was carried off into captivity as slaves of the conquerors. And yet in almost every case the great prophets of this people found in the war and the tragedy a judgment of God, not upon the cruel conqueror but upon the Jewish people themselves! They actually found the war and captivity a great good. And according to their manner of speech and thought they thought God had personally visited the war upon them and they thanked Him for it! Cyrus, the Persian war-lord, was literally called "a shepherd of God", not by some ignorant wayfarer, but by Isaiah, perhaps the greatest religious figure in Jewish prophecy. Alongside Isaiah towers the figure of Jeremiah who told his own people that the kings of Babylon who were destroying them were no less than the servants of God! Other lesser prophets at different times uttered the same truth for war in their own time. We may dispute the theological accuracy of their statements but we cannot avoid the spiritual truth of their insight. War is a judgment of God upon the peoples engaged in it. The leaders who make these wars, however evil they may be, can be thought of as servants of God to bring the nations back to Him and His ways. God help us to rise to the level of being able to see the war in this light. Then, although we may not thank God for the war, we shall be thankful that we have found God through the war.